

The New York Times

The Opinion Pages

Opinionator

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THE STONE

Navigating Past Nihilism

By **Sean D. Kelly** December 5, 2010 5:15 pm

“Nihilism stands at the door,” wrote Nietzsche. “Whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?” The year was 1885 or 1886, and Nietzsche was writing in a notebook whose contents were not intended for publication. The discussion of nihilism — the sense that it is no longer obvious what our most fundamental commitments are, or what matters in a life of distinction and worth, the sense that the world is an abyss of meaning rather than its God-given preserve — finds no sustained treatment in the works that Nietzsche prepared for publication during his lifetime. But a few years earlier, in 1882, the German philosopher had already published a possible answer to the question of nihilism’s ultimate source. “God is dead,” Nietzsche wrote in a famous passage from “The Gay Science.” “God remains dead. And we have killed him.”

There is much debate about the meaning of Nietzsche’s famous claim, and I will not attempt to settle that scholarly dispute here. But at least one of the things that Nietzsche could have meant is that the social role that the Judeo-Christian God plays in our culture is radically different from the one he has traditionally played in prior epochs of the West. For it used to be the case in the European Middle Ages for example — that the mainstream of society was grounded so firmly in its Christian beliefs that someone who did not share those beliefs could therefore not be taken seriously as living an even potentially admirable life. Indeed, a life outside the

Church was not only execrable but condemnable, and in certain periods of European history it invited a close encounter with a burning pyre.

Whatever role religion plays in our society today, it is not this one. For today's religious believers feel strong social pressure to admit that someone who doesn't share their religious belief might nevertheless be living a life worthy of their admiration. That is not to say that every religious believer accepts this constraint. But to the extent that they do not, then society now rightly condemns them as dangerous religious fanatics rather than sanctioning them as scions of the Church or mosque. God is dead, therefore, in a very particular sense. He no longer plays his traditional social role of organizing us around a commitment to a single right way to live. Nihilism is one state a culture may reach when it no longer has a unique and agreed upon social ground.

The 20th century saw an onslaught of literary depictions of the nihilistic state. The story had both positive and negative sides. On the positive end, when it is no longer clear in a culture what its most basic commitments are, when the structure of a worthwhile and well-lived life is no longer agreed upon and taken for granted, then a new sense of freedom may open up. Ways of living life that had earlier been marginalized or demonized may now achieve recognition or even be held up and celebrated. Social mobility — for African Americans, gays, women, workers, people with disabilities or others who had been held down by the traditional culture — may finally become a possibility. The exploration and articulation of these new possibilities for living a life was found in such great 20th-century figures as Martin Luther King, Jr., Simone de Beauvoir, Studs Terkel, and many others.

But there is a downside to the freedom of nihilism as well, and the people living in the culture may experience this in a variety of ways. Without any clear and agreed upon sense for what to be aiming at in a life, people may experience the paralyzing type of indecision depicted by T.S. Eliot in his famously vacillating character Prufrock; or they may feel, like the characters in a Samuel Beckett play, as though they are continuously waiting for something to become clear in their lives before they can get on with living them; or they may feel the kind of “stomach level sadness” that David Foster Wallace described, a sadness that drives them to distract themselves by any number of entertainments, addictions, competitions, or arbitrary goals, each of

which leaves them feeling emptier than the last. The threat of nihilism is the threat that freedom from the constraint of agreed upon norms opens up new possibilities in the culture only through its fundamentally destabilizing force.

There may be parts of the culture where this destabilizing force is not felt. The Times's David Brooks argued recently for example, in a column discussing Jonathan Franzen's novel "Freedom," that Franzen's depiction of America as a society of lost and fumbling souls tells us "more about America's literary culture than about America itself." The suburban life full of "quiet desperation," according to Brooks, is a literary trope that has taken on a life of its own. It fails to recognize the happiness, and even fulfillment, that is found in the everyday engagements with religion, work, ethnic heritage, military service and any of the other pursuits in life that are "potentially lofty and ennobling".

There is something right about Brooks's observation, but he leaves the crucial question unasked. Has Brooks's happy, suburban life revealed a new kind of contentment, a happiness that is possible even after the death of God? Or is the happy suburban world Brooks describes simply self-deceived in its happiness, failing to face up to the effects of the destabilizing force that Franzen and his literary compatriots feel? I won't pretend to claim which of these options actually prevails in the suburbs today, but let me try at least to lay them out.

Consider the options in reverse order. To begin with, perhaps the writers and poets whom Brooks questions have actually noticed something that the rest of us are ignoring or covering up. This is what Nietzsche himself thought. "I have come too early," he wrote. "God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown." On this account there really is no agreement in the culture about what constitutes a well-lived life; God is dead in this particular sense. But many people carry on in God's shadow nevertheless; they take the life at which they are aiming to be one that is justifiable universally. In this case the happiness that Brooks identifies in the suburbs is not genuine happiness but self-deceit.

What would such a self-deceiving life look like? It would be a matter not only of finding meaning in one's everyday engagements, but of clinging to the meanings those engagements offer as if they were universal and absolute. Take the case of

religion, for example. One can imagine a happy suburban member of a religious congregation who, in addition to finding fulfillment for herself in her lofty and ennobling religious pursuits, experiences the aspiration to this kind of fulfillment as one demanded of all other human beings as well. Indeed, one can imagine that the kind of fulfillment she experiences through her own religious commitments *depends upon* her experiencing those commitments as universal, and therefore depends upon her experiencing those people not living in the fold of her church as somehow living depleted or unfulfilled lives. I suppose this is not an impossible case. But if this is the kind of fulfillment one achieves through one's happy suburban religious pursuit, then in our culture today it is self-deception at best and fanaticism at worst. For it stands in constant tension with the demand in the culture to recognize that those who don't share your religious commitments might nevertheless be living admirable lives. There is therefore a kind of happiness in a suburban life like this. But its continuation depends upon deceiving oneself about the role that any kind of religious commitment can now play in grounding the meanings for a life.

But there is another option available. Perhaps Nietzsche was wrong about how long it would take for the news of God's death to reach the ears of men. Perhaps he was wrong, in other words, about how long it would take before the happiness to which we can imagine aspiring would no longer need to aim at universal validity in order for us to feel satisfied by it. In this case the happiness of the suburbs would be consistent with the death of God, but it would be a radically different kind of happiness from that which the Judeo-Christian epoch of Western history sustained.

Herman Melville seems to have articulated and hoped for this kind of possibility. Writing 30 years before Nietzsche, in his great novel "Moby Dick," the canonical American author encourages us to "lower the conceit of attainable felicity"; to find happiness and meaning, in other words, not in some universal religious account of the order of the universe that holds for everyone at all times, but rather in the local and small-scale commitments that animate a life well-lived. The meaning that one finds in a life dedicated to "the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country," these are genuine meanings. They are, in other words, completely sufficient to hold off the threat of nihilism, the threat that life will dissolve into a sequence of meaningless events. But they are nothing like the kind of universal meanings for which the monotheistic tradition of Christianity had hoped. Indeed,

when taken up in the appropriate way, the commitments that animate the meanings in one person's life — to family, say, or work, or country, or even local religious community — become completely consistent with the possibility that someone else with radically different commitments might nevertheless be living in a way that deserves one's admiration.

The new possibility that Melville hoped for, therefore, is a life that steers happily between two dangers: the monotheistic aspiration to universal validity, which leads to a culture of fanaticism and self-deceit, and the atheistic descent into nihilism, which leads to a culture of purposelessness and angst. To give a name to Melville's new possibility — a name with an appropriately rich range of historical resonances — we could call it polytheism. Not every life is worth living from the polytheistic point of view — there are lots of lives that don't inspire one's admiration. But there are nevertheless many different lives of worth, and there is no single principle or source or meaning in virtue of which one properly admires them all.

Melville himself seems to have recognized that the presence of many gods — many distinct and incommensurate good ways of life — was a possibility our own American culture could and should be aiming at. The death of God therefore, in Melville's inspiring picture, leads not to a culture overtaken by meaninglessness but to a culture directed by a rich sense for many new possible and incommensurate meanings. Such a nation would have to be "highly cultured and poetical," according to Melville. It would have to take seriously, in other words, its sense of itself as having grown out of a rich history that needs to be preserved and celebrated, but also a history that needs to be re-appropriated for an even richer future. Indeed, Melville's own novel could be the founding text for such a culture. Though the details of that story will have to wait for another day, I can at least leave you with Melville's own cryptic, but inspirational comment on this possibility. "If hereafter any highly cultured, poetical nation," he writes:

Shall lure back to their birthright, the merry May-day gods of old; and
livingly enthrone them again in the now egotistical sky; on the now
unhaunted hill; then be sure, exalted to Jove's high seat, the great Sperm
Whale shall lord it.

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